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National Congress of American Indians

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Senator * or Department*: **BAUCUS**

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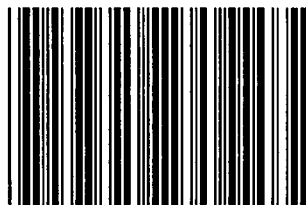
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(2) Subject* none

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BAUCUS

National Congress of American Indians
Statement of Senator Max Baucus
March 3, 2008

Thank you, President Garcia. And thank you for inviting me to speak to the National Congress of American Indians.

As you know well, President Garcia, there are 7 reservations in Montana. And we have one state tribe that is trying to attain Federal recognition. And so, as always, I welcome the opportunity to address issues facing Montana Tribes and all of Indian Country.

**It is also a great pleasure to join my
Colleague, Senator Byron Dorgan, in addressing
this session. No one was more tenacious in the
pursuit of the Indian health bill than Senator
Dorgan. I was proud to have worked with him on
that historic legislation.**

An old Indian proverb says:

**“Treat the earth well. It was not given to you
by your parents; it was loaned to you by your
children. We do not inherit the Earth from our
ancestors; we borrow it from our children.”**

Today, we stand on the threshold of historic times. Let us repay our debt to our children with a better Earth than what we borrowed.

In Indian Country, you are addressing many of the same concerns that we handle on the Finance Committee. And you are making a difference in your goals, for our children. We at the Finance Committee are working to help, with tools that Indian Country can use to move forward.

Let me talk about our mutual goals. And let me do so by saying a few words about the issues that President Garcia mentioned in his State of the Indian Nations address on January 31 of this year.

President Garcia noted in particular:

- economic development,**
- education,**
- law enforcement,**
- and health care.**

I have heard Tribal leaders explain their plans for energy, economic development, and infrastructure. I've seen plans for health care and education. I've seen what safe communities and successful economic development can provide.

Many of these issues are in the jurisdiction of the Senate Finance Committee. We on the Committee can do something about them. And we on the Committee will do something about them.

Take economic development. I am proud to be an original co-sponsor of the Tribal Government Tax Exempt Bond Parity Act. That bill would go a long way toward helping the infrastructure in Indian Country.

Indian Country must be able to issue tax exempt bonds in the same way that non-Indian entities do. Indian Country should be able to use these bonds to help build roads, bridges, and other municipal-type infrastructure. And Indian Country should be able to use these bonds to help provide for the employment of Native workers.

And two other tax items in the Finance Committee also hold out the potential to benefit Native workers. I'm thinking of the Indian Employment Tax Credit and Accelerated Tax Depreciation.

Currently, these tax benefits are extended on a year-to-year basis. And that makes it difficult for companies to plan for the future. These are great tax benefits. But people are not taking advantage of them. That's because companies plan for 5 years or 10 years or longer, depending on the project.

We need to extend these tax benefits beyond their year-to-year duration. We need to make it so that Tribes and others can take advantage of these benefits.

Another one of the issues that President Garcia cited was education. Education is central to repaying our debt to our children. Education is the key to the future of the Indian Nations. And education is the key for all people in America.

Schools in India and China are producing MBAs at an alarming rate. We have to be able to compete.

Congress needs to provide funding for successful programs like the Johnson-O'Malley Program. The Johnson-O'Malley Program helps Native American students to stand on an equal footing with non-Indian and urban students.

We need teachers to teach sciences and math, so that we can keep up with the world.

And Congress needs to do more for the Tribal College and University system. This system helps Native students to study in a familiar setting. And it helps to prepare them to go on to 4-year colleges and universities.

A third issue that President Garcia cited was law enforcement. Law enforcement ensures that we can all live in safety. How can our children study if they are concerned about how safe it is to walk out of the classroom? How can our children study if they are concerned that someone will assault them on the way home?

How can a family sleep at night if they are concerned that someone may break in to their home to find money to support a meth habit?

We need to strengthen the Tribal Courts and the Tribal Police. Detention Centers are sorely needed. What good is it to convict a felon if there is no place to house the perpetrator?

These are questions that we have to answer in a responsible way. And we need to do so soon. According to the President's budget request, public safety and justice has been declining in the operation of Indian programs.

The fourth issue that President Garcia cited was health care. Health care is a basic need of a civilized society. America spends more per person on health care than any other nation in the world. Unfortunately, America does not lead the world in health care outcomes. We have some of the worst infant mortality rates of the developed world.

How can the most powerful and richest of nations have such an abysmal health care record? As you all know, Indian health care needs on the Reservations and in urban centers are even more dire. They are a whole lot more dire.

As Senator Dorgan noted, last week, the Senate took a first step. We passed the Indian Health Care Improvement Act. We did so by an overwhelming vote of 83 to 10. I was proud that last year, the Finance Committee contributed its part of that bill.

It has taken a long time to get here. But the victory was just as sweet.

The Indian Health Care Improvement Act will improve health care for American Indians. And it will do more.

This bill was a victory for Tribal Sovereignty. It was a victory for Tribal self-determination. And it was a victory for Native Nations throughout this Country. It was a re-affirmation of Native American dignity. And it was a re-affirmation of the rightful place of Native Americans in American Society.

It was a re-affirmation of your culture. It was a re-affirmation of the promises made for the relinquishment of tribal lands. You have much to be proud of in your quest to reauthorize this important bill.

The Indian Health Care Improvement Act is a good start. But we must do more. American Indian health care has been bought and paid for with tribal lands. In some cases, the guarantee of health care is in the treaties between the United States and Indian Tribes.

Everyone here knows the horrible reality of disparities in health care spending and outcomes for Native Americans. We must eliminate these disparities.

We need better health care in Indian Country. We need better healthcare education. And we need more doctors and nurses. We must find a way to recruit and retain doctors and nurses in the rural areas where reservations are found.

Facilities and equipment are sorely needed. And prescription drugs must be dispensed to those in need, not just to mask pain when a doctor is not available to treat the disease.

This year, we at the Finance Committee will begin a major review of health care in the Country. Next year will be a big year for health care reform. And reform of Indian health care will be an important part.

And so, we have much to do.

Thank you for inviting me here today to speak to you about it. Thank you for the opportunity to serve your needs and to make a difference in Indian Country. I will continue to try to help better the lives of Indian Country. And I will continue to be a friend of Indian Country.

And so, together, let us continue to work to treat the earth well. Let us work to repay the debt that we owe to our children. And in so doing, let us also bring honor to all of our ancestors.